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ABSTRACT

In spite of the many difficulties and limitations faced by a college English professor who chose to teach literature to prisoners, this paper reports that he was able to remain enthusiastic about the effort. While noting that the prisoners were not interested in literary form or theme, the paper describes how they were able to respond powerfully to what they read and how they often came to class eager to share their perceptions and feelings about episodes from such works as "Crime and Punishment," "Candide," "Heart of Darkness," and "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn." The paper discusses the ways in which the prisoners were able to connect the lives of the characters they read about with their own lives and offers examples of their written responses to various literary works. (FL)

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Teaching Literature in Prison -- Or Confessions of a Neo-Pragmatist

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When I first began to teach in prison several years ago, I had no special method in mind. In fact, as I look back, I suppose I saw it all as a marginally romantic adventure; beyond that, it was just another extension course, an opportunity to catch up on bills and buy a few extras. I certainly don't remember trying to alter my approach to literature to meet the needs of a special audience. After all, I believed in the critical theories and the analytical skills I had learned, and I was comfortable with them. I taught as I had been taught, and my new students would have to adjust to me.

As an undergraduate, I had been deeply influenced by the "new criticism," which was getting old even then. But it was new to me, and I absorbed it as if it were Gospel. I was studying works of art, teleologically unified structures which stand free from both the mutable author and his age. Art was of intrinsic value, good in and for, because of itself. Everything else was propaganda. In one class, we spent the entire term explicating a single short story-but I learned how to read. Graduate school broadened my understanding of literature, but nothing I learned really challenged my faith in objective criticism. For the most part, my teachers were formalists. I learned some biographical and bibliographical techniques and dabbled with archetypal and psychological criticism, but I was most at home with structural and thematic analysis. I came to teaching believing, as I still in part do, that it was my responsibility to read a text as carefully and objectively as I could and to elucidate that text for my students.

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I expected them to develop similar skills. Isn't that what teachers of literature ought to do?

I'm no longer so sure. With each year, the gap between literary theory and classroom reality seems to widen. What, I wonder, have hermeneuties, semiotics, and deconstructionalism have to do with the actual students I teach, with their needs, abilities and interests? I teach at a regional state university. English enrollments are low, and I spend over half of my time teaching composition courses. I also teach some upper level and even an occasional graduate course, but when I do have an exceptional student, I hesitate to suggest graduate school--for reasons which I'm sure are obvious to everyone. Most of my students couldn't care less about non-referential structures; they're taking my course because it's required or because they've got a free elective and a class titled "Good Books" sounded interesting--and easy. Some of them claim they might have majored in English, if it weren't for the job market.

From what I've read, this is not an unusual situation, nor is it likely to change in the near future. Michigan is hard pressed for funds, the school administration is talking about retrenchment, I'm glad to have a job. But in those moments free from paper grading and committee meetings when I pause and try to make sense out of my life, I wonder if I'm really accomplishing very much.

Yet I have no such apprehensions about my prison teaching, even though it might seem that I should. The Marquette Branch Prison, which is located on the outskirts of town, is Michigan's maximum security facility. It currently offers a two-year associates degree in general studies to its relatively small inmate population, many of whom are serving long-term sentences. The program itself is administered

rather loosely and funding, especially during the present state economic crisis, is limited and unstable; so it is impossible to tell when or if any given course will be offered. Students sign up for what is available at the time; whether or not they're prepared for or interested in the course they're enrolled in is, at best, of secondary importance. Typically, many-perhaps most of my students-won't finish the course. They'll be transferred, get locked in the hole for fighting, or simply drop out because of boredom, frustration, or what I'll call institutional depression. Those who remain in class are often there so they can collect veteran's benefits, avoid work details, or improve their relationship with the parole board. Frequently, my course is their introduction to college level work. Other than their training for the G.E.D. examination many of them take for the high school equivalency diploma, they usually have had little recent experience in a classroom of any kind. The prison population is 60% black and 40% white and racial tensions are an implicit, occasionally explicit part of every session. (For example, blacks always sit to the front of the room, whites at the rear, so I often conduct class from the side rather than the front of the room. That way, I have blacks on one hand, whites on the other--a not altogether pleasant position at times, such as when the Neo-Nazis and the Black Muslims debate the merits of <u>The Autobiography of Malcolm X</u>.) For an inmate, survival in prison depends upon his ability to project apparent strength. Any vulnerability, any weakness or defensiveness is quickly perceived by the other inmates and exploited. In such an environment, intimidation is a fact of life, the way things are, and it can also be part of the classroom if the instructor appears weak, unsure of himself, or simply

diffident about basic discipline. Break time can last for half an hour; class discussions can turn into windy bull sessions, showcases for the class clowns and loudmouths, opportunities to bitch about "the joint" and "the man"; plagiarism can become the norm. Students miss class for vague reasons and insist they be allowed to make up the work they've missed. Guards forget to unlock the classroom on time or to call the students out of their cellblocks. Some of them resent the college program because it's paid for with their tax money, and they didn't get the state to pay for their education. The prison library is a travesty, stocked with book club discards from St. Vincent DePaul and Reader's Digest condensed books. In most of my literature classes, at least half of the students have never had a writing course and some of them need a remedial reading program. Some of them are semi-literate at best. I wonder, shall I assign a ten or a fifteen page original critical essay on Dostoevsky this semester?

But in spite of these difficulties and limitations (or perhaps because of them) I remain enthusiastic about teaching in prison. And I am not alone. This fall, Ray Ventre, also of the Northern Michigan University English Department, and I received a consultant grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities to work on the development of a humanities program for the prison. Since then, I've talked to numerous people, both at Northern and elsewhere, and all of them seem to share my feelings. Perhaps we begin out of mere curiosity, but something much more than that keeps us coming back. What is it? In a recent issue of College English, Raymond Hedin explains it this way:

> Faculty who go out of their way to teach in prisons, do so partly because it seems preferable to teaching on campus, or at least preferable to teaching exclusively on campus. The urge is not only for variety in the abstract but for a clientele specifically different from today's on-campus students, by most accounts relatively unengaged, unassertive, career-oriented, pre-professional mainstreamers more interested in raising their grade points than their consciousness. In that context, the prison offers-or seems to-the lure of the underground, the student as outsider, the rebel who in a literal sense has resisted "the system" to the extent of breaking its laws. Consequently, the prison tends to attract those faculty not wholly comfortable themselves within that system: ex-peace corps volunteers, children of the 60s inclined to social criticism or change, and in general those academics who have something akin to a sense of mission-embarrassing as that term is in the 70s-about the subject they teach and its potential for changing minds." (280-81 CE, No. 3, Vol. 41, November 79)

Well, I served in the Marine Corps, not the peace corps, but the shoe probably fits, and Hedin does have the answer to my question: a real education is substantive, not technical, and it affects the way we live; it changes minds. Prison teaching encourages the priest-or preacher if you like-that I suspect lurks in most teachers to emerge. In prison, I can't teach literature as a disinterested critic. Even if I wish to, I can't rely on complex critical language because my

students won't tolerate it. More important, it doesn't seem to have much significance in such an environment. I cover some of the basics, of course, and we spend some time on the analysis of form and theme, but in a three-hour block course, my students grow impatient with motifs and objective correlatives. For them, that's not where the action is.

My student inmates often respond powerfully - if, by some standards inaccurately - to what they read; and they come to class anxious to share their perceptions and feelings. Whatever else their shortcomings may be, they are often more intense and open in class than their on-campus counterparts. They want to talk about the book, they have questions, but few of them are deeply interested in form and theme. They want to talk about the characters, about these people whose lives they've been reading about. That's where they make the connection, reacting to the fate of others who, like them, have dreamed and succeeded, failed and triumphed, suffered and found salvation. Why, they ask, doesn't Candide tell Pangloss to get lost? What's Hamlet so worked up about? Why does Marlow care about Kurtz? People they understand - they do their time by learning how to deal with people. I can explain how fictive characters can be divided into aesthetic, illustrative or representational types, or how mimesis itself is a mere displacement from the underlying mythic quality of the work, but they talk about characters as if they were flesh and blood. Pushed to the wall, I can lecture a bit on psychological criticism, but on the phenomenological level I'm, at best, only their equal - and I have to fight for that.

Yet, however unorthodox such discussions may appear, they can lead to moments of profound insight, both for the group and the individual.

For example, not long ago I sat at a table one Saturday morning with a small group of men. There were about a dozen of us: two professors- one doing a bit of gratis team-teaching - and the inmates, several of them convicted of violent crimes and sentenced to life imprisonment. We were discussing The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn. Ray Ventre, my teaching partner for the day, had offered a reasonable justification for the so-called flawed conclusion of the novel. It shows Huck's growth, he insisted. Seeing an opening, I played devil's advocate and disagreed. The students loved that: two professors and even they don't know what the truth is. I remember leaning back in my chair and gazing out the window at the gun turret across the yard, abstracted for a moment from the argument raging about me by the seeming absurdity of it all. What was I - what were we doing on such a day in such a place talking about mere blobs of black marks on paper, about people who had never lived and yet who seemed so important to those where were not living? Returning to the debate, I asked, "But where can Huck go out there in the territory? Where is he going with his search for freedom?" "No doubt about it," responded one of the students, "only one place Huck's going and that's to jail, just like his Pap."

I remember too another day towards the conclusion of a mythology course I taught last year. I had been reviewing how early Roman history seemed to merge into legend and myth, how history and fiction sometimes (if not always) overlap. I went on to speculate how much mythology remains a part of our daily life, how difficult it is to live without illusions, without the romance of the self, and how many people - and nations too - are driven by our dreams of what we would be, or our fears of what we might become. "That's right," volunteered a class member. "I'm here because I had to live out the "John Wayne myth."

The police surrounded the store I was holding up, but I didn't have the brains to put down my gun and come out. I had to John Wayne it, so I shot and killed one of them, and now I'm doing natural life. Lots of us are here because of the John Wayne myth."

In a Good Books class, we have been studying Dostoevsky's Crime and Punishment. The discussion centers in on Rakolnikov's refusal to repent of his crime, the murder of two women during a pointless robbery. One student seems to identify with Raskolnikov. Why, he asks, shouldn't a man take what he needs if he is deprived or discriminated against by society? What if he has to feed his family? Should he obey the law and let them starve? Why should he be asked to obey the laws if those laws are ignored or manipulated by others? But another class member challenges this point of view. "After all," he points out, "if things got that bad, you could always make a living as a pahhandler." "But," says the first student, "I couldn't do that. I've got my pride." "That's right," say the other, "your pride is more important to you than the law, we're all Raskolnitovs."

Such moments of recognition also emerge in the student's written work. The following is a sample journal entry:

> For a week now I have been trying to come up with something to enter into this journal on Crime and Punishment. At first, I was going to make a short entry as to how I didn't like the book. Then you explained the significance of the passage of Mikolka beating the old man to death, and the book took on a whole new aspect to me.
>
> I think Dostoevsky did a hell of a job in making the reader (this reader anyway) feel the same things as some of the characters did. Or maybe now that I think of it, maybe it was

cause I have experienced some of the same feelings, like guilt and the dread of knowing that a payment for an act was coming due.

I don't think Raskolnikov was insane--for an insane person doesn't feel guilt such as Roddy did. I do think that he was a bit off (perhaps a bit of an ass also?) though. He was trying to see if he was made of the same material as greatness is made of and to me greatness is kind of a Catch 22 question. If you have to keep checking that you are of greatness, chances are you are not.

Referring back to Candide. I think or feel that what Dostoyevsky was saying was that we all may have to work in the "garden" and perhaps wonder as to "why" the garden was there in the first place, but one of the things that we have to do is also live in the garden no matter what shape we put it in. And I think this was the point that he was trying to make through Raskolnikov: that regardless of the laws that men make for themselves and each other, and regardless of the laws that may of been written in stone, each man has laws or rules that are inside of himself, and these laws are the ones that can torture a person to death if they are broken.

Another student compared Raskolnikov and Kurtz of Conrad's Heart of Darkness in his final examination:

Kurtz and Raskolnikov are both men that want to do great things in this world. Kurtz went to Africa to make his fortune in ivory, while Raskolnikov goes off to college to make his fortune in law. Kurtz wants to convert the black African to Christianity, while Raskolnikov wants to help the peasants to

a better life. They both wanted to be great; Kurtz wanted to be a God, while Raskolnikov wanted to be another Napoleon. This was their downfall.

In the long run, we must see that their ends represent the means in process and the ideal in the making. Their means--killing--did not justify their ends--greatness--because the ends are pre-existent in the means.

Immoral destructive means cannot bring about moral and constructive ends. The true meaning in their stories is to look at our own lives.

Finally, this passage from another student's examination:

The books in this class that affected me the most was Candide and The Heart of Darkness. In Candide, I learned that it is all fine and good to dream and hope for a better future, but dreaming won't get it for you; you must work now for tomorrow.

In The Heart of Darkness, I learned that even the highest moral values can change with your surroundings.

The question should not be can you learn moral values from books, but can you keep yourself from learning?

In his "Apologie," Sidney defines poetry as the art of imitation, which has as its purpose to both teach and to delight. Sidney believes the poet is superior to both the philosopher and the historian because of his capacity "to move his auditors more forcefullv to virtue," and "by disguising his doctrine in a tale "enticing even "harde hearted evill men" into the love of goodness "as if they tooke a medicine of Cherries. For who will be taught," he asks, "if he be not moved with desire to be taught, and what so much good doth that teaching bring forth (I speak

still of moral doctrine) as that it moveth one to do that which it doth teach?" I suspect that Sidney was more certain of the meaning of words like "truth" and "virtue," but I've decided that we've got a fair amount in common, especially about the value of literature, its capacity to move, and the business of teaching. More and more, I discover myself becoming what M. H. Abrams described as a pragmatic critic. Unlike my teachers, I can't be satisfied with objective textual analysis, at least not when I teach in prison. Art may be an end in itself, but it is also a means, a vehicle for consciousness.

As I mentioned before, many of my inmate students are serving long sentences. Some of them may never get out of prison; in truth, I hope one or two of them never do. Even so, in the opinion of the Marquette prison school director, the academic program is the only real form of rehabilitation taking place behind the walls. It's tempting to believe that, even though I'm not sure that some of my students will ever be able to adjust to society, but even if it's true, what is the meaning of rehabilitating someone who is serving multiple life sentences? In the end, he'll still be in prison. Yet as the academic director of the Statesville, Illinois prison puts it, education is good for everyone. And from at least one philosophical point of view, we are all the condemned man. It's a matter of how well, how honestly and completely, we fill up our time. Whatever they may have done, wherever they're going, my inmate students lives are going on right now; and I believe that literature can help them make those moments more meaningful. It's their humanity that's of ultimate value to me--good in and for, because of itself.

To conclude, I'd like to read one last paper. The inmate who wrote it was the best student I had last term, but he had to take an

incomplete because he got locked up in "the hole"--I was told they found him with hacksaw blades in his possession.

Huck Finn lives the life that most American boys dream of living. Most boys don't want to live on the river, but they want the degree of freedom that Huck enjoys. He doesn't have any adults to answer to, and he has a companion that sticks with him. He has adventure, freedom, and a friend to share the adventures with. What more could a boy ask for? But there's something Huck hasn't realized yet; there's a lot more to life than freedom and adventure.

I wanted a life of freedom when I was younger. I got it too. But it didn't take long before I found out that the freedom I had had its costs too. They didn't seem like much at the time, but as I got older and more mature, I realized the cost was pretty dear. I missed the education I wanted; there was more travel than Huck ever dreamed about; I led a life that was free, but there was no place called home. There were plenty of acquaintances, but no life long friends or old school buddies. There were no memories of high school prom or graduation, no high school dates, or even high school girls. This might not seem like much to most people, but take these experiences out of your life and look at yourself again. Is there something missing? Sure there is; the foundation that you're built on.

Yes, I got an education, I know a horse from the inside out, but I didn't get the education I wanted until I came to prison. I had a great career too, but all that travelling gets old quick when you spend ninety days here, sixty days there, and forty-five days someplace else. The place you do call home is only visited for two or three days between race meets, and your kids don't know you because you're never home, and

what makes it worse is that you can't quit what you're doing; it is all you know and all you have ever done. Why? because you had to have that freedom when you were young and you never learned anything else. You're trapped when you get older and can't do it anymore, and there's nothing to fall back on. What then? You realize that Hucks' life isn't as good as you thought it was. It's too late for you, so you try to guide your children.

Because of one of my recent visits, one spot in Huck's life really struck me, and brought me an interesting insight into this episode of Huck's life. He went to the circus and watched the old drunk ride the circus horse. The man turned out to be with the circus, and not an old drunk at all. It was a grand surprise for Huck.

On my visit one of my old girlfriends showed up. I hadn't seen her in almost five years, and I was shocked when she walked into the visiting room. She had a little boy by the hand. I knew he was my little boy because many people had tole me about him, but I had never seen him.

As the visit progressed, Reva told me she was moving to Oklahoma and she wanted me to see Tony before she left. I enjoyed the visit. Reva is a very pretty and charming lady. We talked about some of the new colts she has on the track, and she told me that a lot of people missed me around the track. Then Tony climbed up on my lap and started telling me stories. He told me about the Three pigs, Jack and the Beanstalk, Goldilocks and the Three Bears, and then he dropped the bomb on me; he told me the story about his dad. I just sat and listened. He said his dad was a good jockey, but he wasn't on the track anymore. He was in jail. Tony tole me how someone had been killed and his dad

was blamed for it, but he didn't do it. The little boy sat there on my lap and finished telling me the story of his dad. He knew the story as well as I do, but he didn't know he was sitting on his dad's lap telling him his own story. I didn't tell him who I was. Unlike the drunk, I couldn't reveal who I really was, but Reva told me that on their way home Tony asked, "Mom, that was jail wasn't it?"

Since that visit Reva has written me a lot of letters, and Tony signs his name to every one of them. He even sent me pictures of him and his horse. Reva says he sat down and looked at all her win pictures and put the pictures of me to the side. I know he just wanted to verify what he thought.

Like Dostoyevsky's Raskolnikov, I have an immense conflict going on inside of me. It isn't because I've killed someone, it's because I love so many people and can't be with any of them. When I get out of prison I don't know if I'll go to one of the people I love, or if I'll resume the nomadic ways of the life I love. The turmoil I feel inside of me makes me look at Raskolnikov in a different light. Though the circumstances are different, we feel much the same on the inside.